

## Lady Beattie – an inspiration to us all

Lady Beattie is standing down after 23 years as Patron of Diabetes New Zealand. She feels it is time to bow out gracefully and spend more time with her 20 grandchildren and one great-granddaughter. A great champion for diabetes, Lady Beattie has lived with the condition for a decade. She tells **Caroline Wood** how she does it.



“It’s a tremendous shock for parents when they discover their child has diabetes.” – Lady Beattie

LADY Norma Beattie sparkles with energy as she welcomes us into her central Wellington apartment on the top floor of an art deco block. Beautifully turned out in lilac with an elegant scarf tied around her neck, she looks fit, healthy and far younger than her 85 years.

She shows us a large intricate tapestry in soft colours inspired by a trip to the Kimberley region in Western Australia, an area rich in Aboriginal art and history. It will include a dedication for her eldest daughter Sarah who died last year of a brain tumour. The embroidery is meditative and gives her a reason to get up in the morning.

“Tapestry is what keeps me going. It keeps me motivated,” she says.

“I am not following a design, I am using colours that appeal to me. I was very inspired by the Kimberley. I found the land very spiritual, I have travelled a lot but it’s the best place I have been.”

Lady Beattie has seven children and comes from a family of ‘strong’ women. She talks proudly of her children, 20 grandchildren – 10 grandsons and 10 granddaughters – and her three-year-old great-granddaughter.

Diabetes first touched her life when her youngest son Simon was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at the age of 14. She also has a granddaughter and nephew with Type 1 diabetes.

Following Simon’s diagnosis, Lady Beattie became joint patron in 1988 with her husband former Governor General Sir David Beattie.

The couple worked hard helping Diabetes New Zealand raise the profile of diabetes, trying to reduce the stigma and educate people about the condition.

“It’s a tremendous shock for parents, when they discover their child has diabetes out of the blue. But there’s good education out there and people pick it up very quickly and easily.

There’s no reason why you can’t lead a better way of life with the knowledge you have. It’s not complicated when you understand what it’s all about.”

She is living proof of this.

Ten years ago Lady Beattie was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, an irony that hasn’t escaped her. “It made me legitimate,” she says with a wry smile.

“I discovered I had diabetes a few years after David died. I had always had good health. I wasn’t sleeping very well and went to the doctor. My blood pressure



was sky high and he told me to go and have a blood test. Then he told me I was diabetic. I was 75 years old.

"I went out and got a dog and I go out walking every day. It keeps me fit and gives me the motivation to go out. After 10 years I have stabilised. My levels are between 6.2 and 6.4. I exercise every day, I walk two or three times a day.

"My advice when you are diagnosed is not to panic. You take a big breath and think how you can improve your lifestyle. And you certainly look at your diet. For me it wasn't the sugar. It was the fat. You take advice and you go to a nutritionist."

Lady Beattie has lived a full and rewarding life. She trained as a nurse in Auckland before meeting lawyer David Beattie. They were married when she was 24 years old and son John was born 11 months later. He was the first of seven children.

David Beattie became a judge at the age of 45 and the family moved to live in Wadestown, Wellington, in 1969. His wife was working as a nurse, when she found she was pregnant with her youngest son Simon, at the age of 47.

The family moved into Government House in 1980 when Simon was seven after Sir David was made Governor General of New Zealand. Then came the first of several royal visits, including one where Prince Charles and Princess Diana brought baby Prince William. It was Lady Beattie who gave William the famous 'Buzzy Bee' toy that he played with during his international photo call.

The Beatties travelled all over the country during their time at Government House, an experience that was to shape their later charitable work. "We fell in love with our own people as well as the country," Lady Beattie recalls.

After retiring, the couple settled in Heretaunga in Wellington's Hutt Valley, and continued with their charitable work. After Sir David died in 2001, and was given a state funeral, Lady Beattie continued as sole Patron of Diabetes New Zealand.

She says things have changed for the better over the years. She said "I think awareness about diabetes is much higher and people are prepared to listen and

think about it. The stigma has practically gone. It was ignorance.

"I tried to support people and encourage them to think it wasn't abnormal. That it was ok to have diabetes. You just have to make sure it's under control and stay cheerful, that's important."

Asked why she is standing down, she replies with a smile: "I think I am too ancient. I think there are other people who have more energy and can make a greater contribution. I think out of sheer affection, they have kept me on."

She acknowledges there is still a lot of work to do to educate people and decision-makers about diabetes, particularly Type 2 diabetes.

"I am very concerned about overweight people. There's a lack of discipline in their lives, in terms of bad eating habits. There are some young people who have fast food as their favourite option," she said.

"Healthy eating doesn't have to be expensive. I am known as a great soup maker. I specialise in BOF soup – bottom of the fridge soup. My granddaughter says I am a good cook."

She pays tribute to the work of Diabetes New Zealand and notes it has become more professional and business-like over the years: "They are able to interpret things very much better to the government of the day."

Her favourite trick to get decision-makers and MPs to sit up and take notice was to ask them if they had been tested for diabetes recently.

"I would say 60 per cent go undiagnosed, so go and get yourself tested. You may be surprised. If you do have an indication, you can change tack, change your lifestyle. It makes you feel more confident as you get older."

Lady Beattie is looking forward to spending more time with her family and working on her embroidery.

"I have got a lot of projects and I have got a large family. I want to feel close to them and see my children's children and their children," she says with a smile. ●